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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic case study examined a kindergarten teacher's efforts to promote multicultural literacy learning in her own classroom and school. The teacher taught in a predominantly white, suburban, K-2 elementary school and considered literacy learning as a social process related to community building. The teacher presented her plan for implementing multicultural literacy learning (part of her Master degree project) at a school faculty meeting. Two first-grade teachers, a second-grade teacher, and the ESL teacher expressed interest in participating in a steering committee. Data analysis was ongoing and continuous, using the constant comparative method. Results indicated that: (1) the teacher made classroom changes related to holidays and celebrations, the kinds of literature she read aloud to her students, and interaction with the ESL teacher; (2) other members of the steering committee did not seem interested in actually making changes in their classrooms; (3) the teacher strengthened communication with the parents of all her students, and 25 of 40 families gave classroom presentations; (4) the teacher's successes with parents were not experienced by other members of the committee; and (5) conflicts occurred among the kindergarten staff, the multicultural education committee, and the administration. Findings suggest that the changes were punctuated with culturally related conflict--colleagues did not appear to see a need for understanding the increasingly diverse populations in classrooms. (Contains 24 references.) (RS)

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Reflections On Cultural Conflict: One Teacher's Struggle For Change

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During the last five years of my teaching career, I noticed that bilingual, ethnic-minority students usually had emotional problems as well as academic problems in my kindergarten classroom. I believe that my failure to understand and appreciate cultural diversity greatly affected those students' classroom behavior and performance.

Mrs. Starr's (psuedonym) reflections were expressed during the year she worked on her Master's project. The main purpose of her project was to promote multicultural literacy learning in her own classroom and school.

My case study of Mrs. Starr's reflections upon her efforts to change her classroom and school contribute to our understanding of teachers as change agents (Fullan, 1993) and reflective professionals (Schon, 1983). Her reflections demonstrate a process and encourage us to accomplish similar work.

Background of the Study

The results of a year-long ethnography of two bilingual, ethnic-minority children's literacy learning in Mrs. Starr's (pseudonym) kindergarten classroom (Schmidt, 1993) helped her become aware of the need to understand and appreciate other cultures. The data described her struggles and the children's struggles as cultural conflicts were manifested during formal literacy learning sessions, work and play settings, holidays and classroom celebrations and home-school communications. Therefore, Mrs. Starr wanted to understand and call attention to multicultural literacy learning. Her goal was to change the teaching / learning environment in her

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classroom and encourage similar changes in other classrooms in her school. She began by sharing information from the ethnographic study with the school principal. Next, she presented a proposal for change. Finally, the principal officially sanctioned her project when an outlined plan was submitted and accepted by the school district central administration.

Related Research

Mrs. Starr saw a need for change and began the process for change. She studied the research which suggests that children who represent bilingual, ethnic-minority groups have great difficulty fitting into the context of American classrooms (Hakuta, 1986; Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990). Their struggles are believed to occur because they must function within at least two cultures as they develop their literacies (Cummins, 1989). Furthermore, as a teacher, she had struggled when working with bilingual, ethnic-minority children, because of her lack of cultural understanding. Subsequently, she also began to study the research which suggested that she was not alone in her struggles (Rist, 1973; Ogbu, 1978; Phillips, 1983; Spindler, 1987; Cuban, 1989). She spoke to colleagues and found that they had experienced the same when working with bilingual, ethnic-minority children. Therefore, as a reflective practitioner (Shon, 1983) and change agent (Fullan, 1993) she began sharing information and questions with other educators whom she trusted.

Research demonstrates that teacher understanding of students' cultural backgrounds (Ogbu, 1978; Au & Mason, 1981; Phillips, 1983; Spindler, 1987; Divoky, 1988) can help teachers appreciate cultural diversity which in turn will help students reconcile cultural differences and develop their literacies. Also, teacher attitudes about their own abilities to teach children of diverse backgrounds are important for student literacy learning in classrooms (Good & Brophy, 1991). However, teacher

education programs have only recently begun to prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms (Cummins, 1991; Goodlad, 1991; Nieto, 1992). Consequently, most teachers in the field are often left to initiate their own studies of multicultural literacy learning and then act to make changes (Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990; Atkin, 1991). Additionally, there are few case studies of teachers as reflective practitioners and change agents (Schon, 1983; Fullan, 1993). Therefore, my systematic study of Mrs. Starr's reflections upon change in her classroom contributes to our understanding of how an individual teacher works for educational change.

Methodology

Focal Informant: Mrs. Starr

Similar to the teacher in Among Schoolchildren (Kidder, 1989), it was not in Mrs. Starr's European-American experiences to understand other cultures. Also, her teacher training had not promoted contact and understanding of other cultures. Her struggle to understand two bilingual, ethnic-minority children in her kindergarten classroom led to her thinking about developing a multicultural literacy learning project as part of the requirements for a Master of Education degree. She wished to make a difference in her own classroom and in other classrooms in the predominantly white, suburban, K-2 elementary school.

Mrs. Starr's kindergarten program emphasized social interactions for literacy learning through thematic learning centers and whole group mini-lessons followed by small group activities. She believed literacy was not simply reading and writing, but the meaning making which comes from successful social interactions within the classroom. She considered literacy learning as a social process related to community building (Bloome & Green, 1982). She explained, "Our kindergarten program and my classroom are ideal for planting the seeds of multicultural literacy learning."

Mrs. Starr's Plan

Mrs. Starr introduced the plan to her school at a faculty meeting where she and I briefly presented the data from the previous year's study in her classroom. Questions and answers followed. Mrs. Starr then presented the plan for her Master degree project and offered to begin a steering committee for teachers interested in multicultural literacy learning. Mrs. Starr ended her presentation to the faculty with,

> Through the use of multicultural literature and activities, parent involvement and teacher to teacher communication, we can begin to bring other cultures, new ideas, new holidays and new thinking to our classrooms. Children will become aware of differences in people in their community and learn to appreciate those differences.

Two first grade teachers, one second grade teacher and the ESL teacher joined the steering committee; they claimed to see a need for multicultural education. They decided to meet after school on a regular schedule and begin exploring ways to facilitate an appreciation for cultural diversity. Mrs. Starr was pleased with the initial response: "This is a great start. I never expected this much interest. I 'm really happy with the enthusiasm."

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand Mrs. Starr's reflections upon her efforts to develop a multicultural literacy learning project, symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical framework. This framework is based on the premise that the way people act depends on their interpretation of a situation and the meaning they give it (Blumer, 1969). I explored and interpreted Mrs. Starr's perceptions as she developed her project. During the previous year, I had collected data during participant observations and in depth interviews for my dissertation (Schmidt, 1993). This data served as a basis for

the following year's study of Mrs. Starr's reflections as a change agent. I extended my research with hours of taped, in depth, unstructured interviews and kept a personal journal of my own reflections. I also studied Mrs.Starr's journal and her field notes from participant observations during the development of her project.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and continuous from the beginning of the data collection, using the constant comparative methodology (Glaser, 1978). Data were read and reread so that the preliminary themes could be identified and used for analysis. As more data were considered, themes were refined to form the final coding categories. These recurring patterns offered explanations for Mrs. Starr's reflections which were grounded in the evidence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) related to the development of her multicultural literacy learning project. Throughout this study, Mrs. Starr's voice is heard through quotes. These quotes are examples and evidence of research results. These actual words explain persceptions and situations. I gave Mrs. Starr a preliminary copy for validation. She read and responded for accuracy.

Findings from this study demonstrated Mrs. Starr's reflections upon cultural conflict as she worked for changes in classroom practice, home-school communication, and school staff responses.

Reflections Upon Cultural conflict: Classroom Practice

Changes in Classroom Practice

> Every school year, with the rest of the teachers in our school, I filled my classroom with Columbus, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentines, Shamrocks and Easter Rabbits with no thoughts of individual children's home celebrations. I believed that these holidays were important to the majority of children; the minority children would eventually understand. I now realize the

confusions they might have experienced. I knew I had to make changes in my classroom practice.

Mrs. Starr reflected upon her past practice and was determined to make changes. Using the materials, discussions and ideas developed during steering committee meetings, Mrs. Starr attempted to change her classroom lessons to promote multicultural literacy learning. She did not exclude holidays associated with American traditions, but included holidays from around the world. There was learning about Christmas, Hannukah and the Chinese New Year. Instead of creating activities based only on St. Patrick's Day, the children studied Ireland and spring customs around the world. Mrs. Starr also realized that the ESL teacher, Mrs. Brown (pseudonym), studied customs from around the world in her program, so she decided to ask Mrs. Brown to share her knowledge with the kindergarten class.

In the past, Mrs. Starr had only briefly communicated with Mrs. Brown. The exchanges occasionally occurred when Mrs. Brown appeared at the classroom door twice a week to pull students for a half hour of English studies. The children who were in her program often resisted leaving a reading lesson or learning center activity. They would frown, cry or ask why they had to leave. When the steering committee formed, Mrs. Starr met with Mrs. Brown and began talking about an inclusive ESL program in the kindergarten. At first Mrs. Brown hesitated. Mrs. Starr reported,

> Mrs. Brown believed that her children had special needs. They needed time to talk in small quiet groups. Mrs. Brown wondered what she would do in my class. I asked her to share her knowledge with the class and I would help her plan. I assured her that this was something we would try. It won't be written in stone.

When Mrs. Brown agreed to experiment, Mrs. Starr worked around Mrs. Brown's

scheduling needs, since she traveled among three schools to meet with students. They met in fifteen minute and half hour planning and lunch times, but the results were pleasing.

> Mrs. Brown and I coordinated our schedules to fit a push-in program once a week. We read stories from other cultures and prepared multicultural activities. Our ESL students and other students shared their cultures and were visibly excited about the learning of peoples and places around the world.

Mrs. Starr and the ESL teacher believed the literacy learning program needed a greater emphasis on multicultural literature. Mrs. Starr read aloud books recommended in her college children's literature class and those recommended by the librarian and other classroom teachers. With the steering committee, Mrs. Starr and Mrs. Brown began the search and study of catalogs and recommended book lists of multicultural literature. Mrs. Starr noted with satisfaction,

> This year I learned to read books carefully to find out the cultural messages and ideas they were portraying. Through these messages and ideas, lessons about cultural diversity emerged. Books were read for enjoyment, as specific reading lessons with follow-up activities and as part of the push-in ESL lesson for the whole class.

Mrs. Starr was pleased with her classroom changes related to holidays and celebrations, literature and her work with Mrs.Brown's ESL program. She could see change and the results seemed good for the children.

Cultural Conflict and Classroom Changes

Mrs. Starr hoped the steering committee members would begin to use the ideas she was implementing in her classroom, but not all seemed as interested in making change in their classrooms. Mrs. Starr explained,

> All the teachers on the committee love a good book for children, so the multicultural literature study created a lot of enthusiasm, but not all of the teachers read the books aloud or created activities related to other cultures and their holidays. Their reactions seemed to show cultural conflict.

One teacher believed the students would be confused about American traditions if too many other cultures were introduced. Another teacher did not have ethnic-minorites in her classroom, so did not see that it made sense to teach about other cultures unless they were present. Both teachers were concerned about preserving what they believed to be American traditions.

Kites, paper cranes, songs, dances, food, holidays and languages of other cultures were part of Mrs. Starr's classroom and a first grade teacher's classroom. However, the ESL teacher worked only in Mrs. Starr's classroom. The first grade teacher did not believe that her bilingual, ethnic-minority student would receive enough help with the English language if he were not pulled from the classroom for special help. Because his Cambodian home culture was so different from the school culture, she believed that he had to learn to fit in. Mrs. Starr reflected,

> The "fit in" perspective or assimilationist perspective is a very strong influence. Even though teachers may talk about appreciating diversity, they still want everyone to be the same. The cultural conflict is here.

Reflections Upon Cultural Conflict: Home-School Communication

Changes in Home-School Communication

One of the steering committees major goals was to improve communication with bilingual, ethnic-minority parents. They thought it might be easy to get them involved in culturally diverse activities within the classroom. They discussed Faltis' (1993) four levels approach for communicating with multilingual parents. Mrs. Starr immediately

began to strenghten her communication with parents using the approach.

> I reached out to the parents. I visited their homes and asked them to teach me about their home country, language, travels and customs. They began to trust me and share. Eventually they shared in my classroom.

Through a parent presentation form created and developed by the steering committee, all parents were encouraged to become involved in classrooms for sharing hobbies, interests and cultures. Twenty five of a possible forty families gave presentations in Mrs. Starr's classroom. Parents performed scientificexperiments with dry ice, taught sign language and decorated Ukranian Easter eggs. Of the six bilingual, ethnic-minority families, four made presentations in the classroom and two gave Mrs. Starr the information and artifacts to share. Mrs. Starr reflected,

> The Vietnamese, Native American, Hispanic, Italian, Ukranian, Jewish and Korean cultures were presented. The classroom globe became a favorite place to gather in the mornings as students found places related to the cultures they studied.

Mrs. Starr sent home an information sheet, created by the steering committee,at the end of the school year to gather parent reactions to multicultural activities in her classroom. Parents were asked to sit with their children and record their comments on the list of the year's activities. All of the ethnic-minority parents and all but five of the other parents responded. Mrs. Starr selected the following comments to demonstrate the progress made in her class :

"I think that it is very important to teach children at an early age that differences in people does not mean wrong."

"I'm so happy you teach my child and other kids about my country."

"My child like talk our language in your class. He feel important."

"I was amazed to see how much my child remembered about each cultural project."

"We found this year to be very educational for our child. It helped him learn that just because somebody has a different color skin or talks different doesn't mean any better or worse than he is."

"I think learning about different countries and their people and cultures is wonderful for setting the groundwork in making our children understand that we are different but yet we are all the same."

Only one parent expressed concerns, "I wouldn't light those Jewish candles (Menorah) at Christmas; we're not Jewish. They were thrown out."

Mrs. Starr was pleased with most parent reactions. She expressed her feelings openly,

> Parent involvemment during this school year was tremendous in my classroom. Parents were visible on almost a daily basis and made comfortable enough to make presentations and be involved in class activities. The children enjoyed the parent lessons and were stimulated by diversity.

Mrs. Starr was pleased to report that she had not only strengthened her communication with bilingual, ethnic minority parents, but with all of her children's parents.

Reflections on Conflict: Home-School Communication

Mrs. Starr's successes with parents were not experienced by other members of the committee. The other teachers did not actively seek parent involvement. One teacher explained that her ethnic-minority parent acted embarrassed when she was asked to share her culture. "They have not been asked to do this in the past. They feel uncomfortable with it." Another teacher complained that the parent of an ESL child

would not allow the child to get needed help in the program. " I could not make the parent understand. " An unsolicited comment came from a kindergarten parent from another class. She complained to the principal that her child was not getting any multicultural education.

Mrs. Starr explained the reactions of her colleagues on the steering committee:

> They told me that kindergarten parents don't know what has happened in the past so they willingly filled out forms, accepted the multicultural literacy learning activites and the inclusive ESL program without question. The steering committee may be right, but kindergarten is the place to start.

Mrs. Starr was disappointed in steering committee teacher reactions to home-school communications, but she understand them in terms of cultural conflict.

> I believe that some teachers on the steering committee feel uncomfortable with other cultures, because they feel unsure of how to communicate. They have strong feelings about American traditions and are afraid to take risks. They needed a demonstration and I took the risks. Their observations of my successes may encourage them in the future.

Mrs. Starr recognized the teachers perceptions, but maintained the determination to continue with her own efforts. She did not give up the hope for change because it seemed to be working for her situation. Through her own quest for change, she saw the barriers for change become obvious.

Reflections Upon Cultural Conflict:School Staff Responses

"To many teachers and administrators, 'change' is not a nice word. "

Mrs. Starr reflected upon the cultural conflicts which emerged while she attempted to make change in the school. Conflicts occurred among the kindergarten staff, the multicultural education committee and the administration.

Kindergarten Staff

Mrs. Starr's kindergarten program was created by a team of two other kindergarten teachers and a teaching assistant. Together they designed a developmentally appropriate kindergarten program that fit the needs of their students. Wtihin the program they had never emphasized the teaching of cultural diversity, because they were unaware of the need. Multicultural literacy learning activities were not in their personal or professional experiences. Mrs. Starr attempted to discuss her plans with her teammates,

> I will be teaching new ideas in our program this year. I will be sharing them with you, but I certainly don't expect you to do any of them. They should not interfere with our present program.

As the year progressed, Mrs. Starr began to feel tension during team meetings. Because she was having a lot of parent presentations, she was not participating in video and other whole group kindergarten activities. One team member commented when she missed a video, "Oh, I forgot! You're into that multicultural stuff!" When Mrs. Starr explained that she was not going to have a St. Patrick's Day celebration, but an "Around the World Spring Party, "the comment was, "I think you're forgetting about America."

Mrs. Starr attempted to involve her team in a few of her activities. She purchased multicultural crayons for each kindergarten child on the team and distributed them to the teachers. She shared some of the activities related to similarities and differences in skin color and facial characteristics. At the end of the year when she collected the crayons, none had been used in her teammate's classrooms.

Finally, the kindergarten graduation was the place where parent helpers were

recognized with a certificate from each kindergarten teacher. Because Mrs. Starr had twenty-five sets of parents who had participated in her classroom and the other teachers had three and four sets, the principal announced the awards in alphabetical order rather than by classroom. Mrs. Starr's reaction was cautious,

> I was hurt, but I realized the difference was obvious. I hoped that my teammates would try some of my home-school communication ideas next year.

Steering Committee

Mrs. Starr saw cultural conflict emerge within the steering committee. One teacher was uncomfortable with the ESL teacher because of the conflicts which had occurred last year between the ESL teacher and the parents of her bilingual, ethnic-minority student. Also committee members would create and develop cultural information packets and parent surveys but would not collect information from them. Replies such as ,"I sent them home, but they haven't been returned, " or "The parents don't understand them," or "They haven't done anything like this in the past."

Mrs. Starr explained to the members of the committee,

> We have to make the extra effort when working with our ethnic-minority parents. They don't freel comfortable yet. Mine have all responded, because I visited their homes, called often and/or sent notes. We have to get to them before they trust us.

Mrs. Starr believed the steering committee was unsure about investing energy into home-school communication when they were unsure of their own understandings of multicultural education.

Administration

Administrators were another group which expressed cultural conflict. At first the assistant superintendent and principal appeared interested and encouraging.

However, two weeks into the chool year, Mrs. Starr received a note from her principal stating, "Dr. Stack (school superintendint) is concerned about the multicultural education project. He does not want it to become a big issue in the schoo district. So your work will have to be a quiet project in our school."

Mrs. Starr was shocked,

> I couldn't believe it! I felt deflated. How could he say that? They don't have to care about those kids, because their parents can't speak out.

Mrs. Starr also requested translators for parent conferences since she heard that they were availavble at a local volunteer organization. The principal did not pursue the idea claiming lack of time.

The ESL teacher made a written and oral request to the principal and central office for more time to wo:k with teachers to plan inclusive classroom programs for ESL students, but the only response was, "We will consider your request."

Finally, the steering committee wrote a proposal for summer curriculum work. In the past, committee proposals were always accepted, but their proposal was not. Mrs. Starr explains,

> We wanted to create a list of multicultural literature and activities to be used within our school. It would be a multicultural resource for the teachers which would encourage an awareness of cultural diversity. The principal informed us that our proposal was not accepted, but she told us that she didn't know why.

Mrs. Starr expressed great concerns about the administrations reactions to the multicultural literacy learning project. All the schools in the district were beginning to see an influx of bilingual, ethnic-minority students. There seemed to be an apparent need to address diversity. Mrs. Starr conjectured

> Maybe the administration doesn't understand the growing need? Maybe they

choose to ignore diversity, since they fear the issues which might emerge? I do believe this is a manifestation of cultural conflict. They are afraid to recognize the growing population of ethnic-minorities in the school district..

Inspite of the conflict experienced during Mrs. Starr's efforts, she remained hopeful. She saw the progress in her own classroom and she saw the steering committee studying and making attempts to learn. She believed her own teammates would begin to try some of the successes observed in her classroom and finally, she concluded that the administration would eventually have to come to terms with the diversity. She summarized her year,

> Any change seems to cause conflict; the first steps toward the recognition of diversity caused cultural conflict. Educators are unfamiliar with the appreciation of diversity, but I hope what has happened this year will begin the changes in classroom practices, home-school communication and administration responses.

Discussion and Implications

Mrs. Starr's year of reflective practice saw change punctuated with conflict. She saw the conflict as culturally related. She believed the conflict occurred when colleagues did not appear to see a need for understanding the increasingly diverse populations in classrooms. She saw many of the staff embracing the assimilationist perspective(Cummins, 1989; Porter, 1990) which expects minorities to fit into the dominant American culture as quickly as possible for economic success. She believed they feared that American cultural understanding would be diminished if the school promoted the understanding of other world cultures. However, similar to educational researchers (Cummins, 1991; Nieto, 1992; Au, 1993), Mrs. Starr perceived multicultural literacy learning as an educational challenge which enriches

the classroom, promotes social justice and hopefully prevents school drop-out. She plans to continue to work for change in her classroom and the school through formal and informal meetings with colleagues.

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